

FIGHTING FIRES

In the Early Years of the Century.

Reminiscences by One to Whom Most Veterans Are Young Men.

Times When Hose Was Scanty and Buckets Helped It Out.

Not the oldest, but one of the oldest survivors of the old Boston Fire Department, is Charles H. Stearns, a man of nearly as many years as the century. He is still active, and, spite of his years, attends to his business with far more energy than many a younger man displays. As he goes about his saloon, on Atlantic avenue, the only thing about him that suggests his connection with another age, is the old-fashioned way in which his iron-gray hair is arranged, carefully combed corkscrew curls coming down on either side of the forehead in front of his ears.

Mr. Stearns has a remarkable memory for dates, and in the case of every one of the many fires he spoke of to the writer, he told not only the year but also the day and the month, and often the hour when the alarm was rung.

"I suppose I went to more than a thousand fires," said he. "Long before I was old enough to belong to any company I used to go, and afterward I went to about every fire till forty-eight years ago the 19th day of last July, when the department was reorganized. Boston in those days wasn't anything like what it is now. Seventy years ago I used to drive five cows every morning from Proctor's lane (now Richmond street) to the Common. There were no trees to speak of on it then. Most of the houses in those days were wooden, and it's a wonder to me how we fought fires in them as well as we did. But I'd rather fight fire in a wooden than in a brick house.

"Was I there when the Exchange Coffee House was burned? Yes, I remember it well. It was November 3, 1818. The coffee house was a big building eight stories tall, that stood on Congress square. There was a stable near by where hundreds of pigeons lived. I remember seeing them rise from the stable in scores and go

Right Down into the Flames

of the coffee house; the flames sucked them right in. The firemen took one of the engines right up into that building.

"The biggest fire while I was a fireman was the Kilby street fire. It took in houses on Central street and Doane street, burning fifty-three in all, not to count other buildings. That was April 7, 1825. The fire started about 10 o'clock at night, if I remember right, and we got it under control before morning. In those times, when the wells and reservoirs gave out we had to get water from the harbor or wherever we could, and if the hose wasn't long enough we had to use buckets or have one engine pump into another. I have seen five or six engines in this way cover a distance one steam engine could cover today.

"Do you see that picture up there?" asked Mr. Stearns, pointing to the oil painting copied in the cut. "That was the engine I used to run with. That was Slip street (now part of North street). That building at the left was her house. At first we used an old cooper shop, for we couldn't afford a house of our own. I helped put her in the cooper shop in 1822. She was the first engine built in Boston. The one we used before that came from England, and wasn't much good. At first we didn't have much hose—we carried all we had in the store-box on the engine. That was one great trouble we had in fighting fires in those days—we didn't have hose enough.

"The full complement of our company was sixty-four men, but I have seen 150 have hold of the rope. The moment anybody heard a church bell, if it was in the night, he routed out other firemen till there were enough to pull the machine. Then everybody going to the fire would take hold, and it would be a big

Race Between the Companies

to see who would get there first. I have often gone miles out in the country with the engine, out to Dorchester, Cambridge and all round. Often we would hire a horse to help along. When there was snow on the ground sometimes we would put the machine on a big sled. Our company used to have a dog that slept out in front of the house, and whenever he heard a bell he would be crazy till we got there. Oh, it used to be great fun, but there was lots of work about it, and danger, too. I remember when Beecher's church burned (it was on Hanover street, opposite Portland, and burned down February 1, 1830). I went up in a house next door and stepped out of the window on the roof. There was a little snow there and I slipped, and if another fireman hadn't caught me I should have fallen three stories. At that same fire I was standing on a shed playing into the church when a piece of coving fell and broke off the pipe in my hands. If it hit me I should have got my quietus, I expect.

"You see that pipe up there above the picture? That was given our company, No. 15, by Tiger No. 7. Our company, I suppose, was the toughest in the town—all mechanics, good, strong fellows, but pretty rough. We always held our own; if any other company said anything about us at a fire or any trouble came up we just waited till after the fire was out, and then we settled it. Some people have written some pretty hard things about the engine companies in those days. I never saw any of it. One man said the firemen used to get drunk and lie round the floors of the houses. I never saw anybody do that in our house."

FIRE TOOLS.

The Modern Appliances Now Available in Boston Department.

Away back in the forties, when the city was in its provincial infancy, the smallest of fires caused even more of a commotion than some of the largest ones do now. It was customary then for at least half the able-bodied young men of the town to hail and haul for the dozen or more "tubs" that attempted to protect the city. To have a couple of hundred brawny fellows on the line rushing to a fire was the customary thing. The greatest difficulty in those days was the way the fire-herd rushed also.

Since the time of the "call men" up to the present time, the efforts of the fire department has been to gain on the fiend, and the appliances now used in the Boston fire department are in striking contrast with those of the primitive volunteer department.

Not long since THE GLOBE published a cut illustrating the big fire on Charles and Beacon streets, which, at the time, was talked of as the "great fire." It gave the enthusiastic volunteers the hardest kind of a tussle. To the fire laddies of today it would have been but an ordinary blaze to be drownded out in its incipiency. The big fire on Clinton street was fought with all the modern appliances. The nature of the building, its contents and surroundings, and the intense cold to handicap the firemen and convert water into ice soon after leaving the nozzle gave to it all the requisites for a great blaze. It did not, however, spread much beyond the building in which it originated.

This result was owing almost wholly to the improved appliances which have of late years been introduced into the Boston department. These improvements have all sought to attain one object—the assisting of the fireman to get at the fire as soon as possible, and enable him to stamp it out. Thus in these times it is a severe fire indeed that is able to burst beyond the control of

The Hardy Fellows

and their fire-fighting appliances. How different all this is to the days when the call men named their tub, dragged it to the fire, and then pumped a weak stream upon a burning building of two or three stories. The great buildings, with their dozen stories, were not then even thought of. The fighting of a big fire in one of the upper stories of some of our highest buildings would have been beyond their comprehension.

The first departure from the old days was the telegraphic system with its boxes distributed throughout the length and breadth of the city. The alarm sounded, there are but few sections of the city that cannot be reached within five minutes. The exceptions are in the sparsely settled districts of Charlestown, Roxbury, East Boston, Jamaica Plain or Dorchester. Then, too, instead of the hundreds of volunteers at a fire the city now has trained men, who, with their engines, hook and ladder truck and hose carriage go to work on a fire coolly and efficiently. They are not now handicapped by the cumbersome, stiff, old-fashioned leather hose, but instead have a pliable rubber hose and combination hose which are less liable to burst. Instead of the weak spurt of water that could be sent to the fourth story of a house with great effort the engine companies are provided with a Siamese nozzle to throw an immense volume of water for hours to a great height and keep up the stream for days. The streams of as many as four engines can be concentrated in one

pipe, and a solid stream of two inches in diameter sent up to the top of

The Equitable Building.

With their battering ram and the latest tool, the lever jimmy, firemen can now burst open the strongest of doors in a second. There has been much improvement in hydrants, too, and annually hundreds of new ones are being placed in position. This is especially the case in the outlying districts of the city. During the winter they are carefully watched, and at stated periods the firemen make the rounds of the hydrants, and, by salting the covers, keep them clear of ice and snow and at all times exposed.

With the introduction of high buildings came the introduction of great ladders and the water tower, which did such effective work at the Clinton street fire. The old-fashioned ladders were never more than forty-five feet long. How small in comparison with the long ladders now in use. Extension ladders are at hand and the latest improvement has shown a method of expeditiously raising these ladders which has been of great assistance in reaching fires in the upper stories of the tall buildings. The raising, in a few minutes, of this seventy-five-foot ladder is possible for four men by means of a turn-table and lever attachment.

Among the modern appliances is the use of hydrogen lights at large fires. They not only illumine the outside of a building, but penetrate the smoke within for a considerable distance. Then, too, there is the nozzle called the spiral water distributor by which a stream may be spread over thirty feet square if only a hole big enough to get the hose in can be made in a roof or a collar. Another of the improvements is the fire extinguisher used to put out small fires, thus preventing any damage by water. Another contrivance to effect a similar object is the controlling nozzle. This device enables firemen to turn the water back into the engine when the fire is out, without bursting the hose, by simply turning a stop cock. Thus in many instances great damage to stock by water is prevented.

There is another modern practice that has been of assistance to the firemen, although not at all times pleasant to reporters, and that is establishing of police lines around a fire, by which means the crowds are kept at bay.